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The Liquid Crystal Frequency

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THE LIQUID CRYSTAL FREQUENCY

The doctor shines his otoscope past my ear canal, and into the ossicles, searching: cochlea, waxy tubes, auditory nerves. His breath drips down my jaw line, heavy and viscous. I explain to him that I can hear everything. The click of his tongue and the opening of his esophagus. The way his knee chafes against his pants. I hear a mayfly's wings. The buzzing lamp in the corner. Hearts and lungs and other things, too.

What other things? the doctor asks, and I know he is talking about voices. But it's not just a ringing and it's not a voice. Or the echo of a voice.

It's the echo without the voice, I say. If that makes sense.

He says it doesn't and shoves his otoscope in further. I imagine the light shining even deeper, excavating my brain for empty shells.

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It has been one hundred and three days since the girl disappeared, and Jack is supposed to be on television for the first time today. I was supposed to be with him, but we were advised against it. It's best if he sits next to a woman, they said. A pretty one, with sad eyes and no makeup. A sister or a mother. Someone wholesome. You don't want them withholding help because you're a couple.

Jack hates being in front of people, but he's the blood father. He is asleep and he is cringing and I can hear the ache in his chest. His ribcage beats like a song played in steady rhythm. A funeral march to begin the day.

I listen to the streets beside our house and how the morning gains momentum. With Jack's every toss and turn, the cars outside chew through gravel. The voices on the street fill their echoes. Morning parts through braids of night, and I try to think of something to say when he wakes on my shoulder. Good morning, I will say. Did you sleep well?

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If I were going to talk about the girl, I would talk about how she was always

moving. How she was a girl with a heavy head and a small frame. When she was young, we would spend almost every day with her in the garden, watching her crawl through the dirt and scrape her knees until her entire body was mud-blood-drool. I don't want to talk about her, but if I had to, I would mention how she loved the taste of rhubarb or how she was hypnotized by the television screen. I might even add that sometimes, when we looked away in the garden, she dug herself a hole in the ground.

Get out of there, we said. It's not clean.

No. I like how it sounds.

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During breakfast with Jack, my ears begin to ring. He is standing there, flipping pancakes, his mouth moving, and on the outside I'm laughing, but inside, I'm filled with the echo of a scream without a voice: a sound like the remnants of a record scratch, a time lapse, a stone weathering in reverse.

I've gotten pretty good at this.

Jack continues to ramble, and as he does, I close my eyes. If he notices, which he usually doesn't, I'll say I feel asleep – not a hard thing to believe. I let my ears concentrate on the construction workers down the street or the house noises in the attic. Sometimes, I listen to the neighbors next door. Before long, the echoes fade and I hear the placid voices of a mother and father with a fifth grade boy. The type of voices you might hear on TV.

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Here darling, let me fix your tie. Here honey, there's a smudge on your shirt.

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At the television station, there is a woman named Wanda, and everyone says she hosts the worst fucking show. She has white-blond hair and glue-on eyebrows. Jack is going to be her guest at 7:45. Wanda has something she likes to call the 4th minute cry. In her experience, she says, the most successful parents are the ones who with one minute left in their five-minute segment begin to break down. You should never sob because that's just pathetic, she says, but it's best for all of us if your eyes get a little bloodshot and you let your voice crack one time. Practice with me, she tells Jack: Bring our daughter home. He does so and she smiles. A security guard points us towards the dressing room.

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The girl used to say there is a ghost that lives in the garden—that if you dig deep enough, you can hear her scream. She is the reason that the rhododendron withers and the roses grow thorns. At night, she tries to chew a way out. During the day she sleeps. One night, Jack and I woke to a rattling outside the house. We looked out the window and towards the garden. We saw our girl's shoes erect and upside down, her body in the ground, as if she was hanging from a taut line between the brush and wilting green.

Jack pulled her out by the legs, and I expected her to cry: this dirt caked girl with brush scars rolling down her shoulders. Instead, with empty eyes, she asked to dive back in. She said the ghost was protecting her. She lit candles at the dinner table. She wore a red-checkered apron. She had her hair tied in a bun. She was missing teeth. As Jack rocked the girl to sleep in the hopes of calming her mind or maybe just calming ourselves, I picked a plum from a tree in the garden. She took a bite, and we watched the juice spill like venom down her chin.

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The audience is silent. Jack sits in front of a green screen with a woman by

his side. Wanda is slurping up words and spitting them onto the ground, and sometimes Jack catches them, and sometimes he doesn't, but all I can think about is how I should be there too. Crying. Looking into that camera with glass eyes. Jack should have his hand on my thigh, a handkerchief in his pocket. The "we" should include me, and just as I am wrapping my mind around this jealousy, there's a ringing in my ears.

This time, it is a seismologic phenomenon. Waves are sent through my ear and into my body, creating tremors in the crook of my spine, leaving my bones shaken.

I try to close my eyes and let the echoes drift. Still, there are after-shocks. Houses that crack in the canals of my head.

When the noises fade, I look up and see Jack, his face twisted in a way I have never seen. He looks past the camera and I wonder for a moment if he is speaking to me. His eyes move down towards his lap, and he smoothes a crease in his shirt. The camera cuts to black.

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Before the girl disappeared, her principal called a meeting for the school's parents. Jack was supposed to come but he texted me ten minutes before saying he wouldn't be able to make it. Work ran late. I sat in the back of the class, suffocated by a room of husbands and wives and wives and husbands, and I thought about all the different ways I could walk out of the room. How easy it would be to leave.

The principal stood at the front of the classroom and bit her manicured fingernails. She projected pictures of laughing children onto a screen and lectured about how girls need a normal home life to succeed. She smiled like a spider and scanned the room until she settled on my eyes. That passive aggressive sort of thing.

After all, she said, growing up is a kind of vanishing act. One day they're here and the next they're a stranger. A fractured reflection. An ulcer or an anchor tied to your gut.

She continued to flip through photos. Slides like STABILITY and FOCUS and ACADEMIC ACHIEVEMENT and HOW TO HELP YOUR CHILD BECOME THE PERSON THEY ARE MEANT TO BE. As her voice flattened, I began to look out the window. The sky was a dusty orange. There were no leaves left on the trees.

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I wake Jack in the middle of the night. I tell him the ringing is back. He says not to worry; it's just the ghost outside.

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Here honey, I made you a coffin. Please darling, come back to bed.

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Wanda invites herself over to our house. She brings a bottle of expensive wine, and one of those cheese rounds with the waxy paper. Thirty minutes later, she's three glasses in.

All she can talk about are metrics. How at four minutes into the second hour, there was a 70% peak. Florida donated x amount of dollars at three times the standard average whereas Connecticut, and really the entire northeast was coming in at well above five. And that's all good for us, yes, all good for us, and her too, well obviously, of course. But it's mostly good for the girl—and when Wanda says her name it sounds poisonous.

My head rings again, but this time it's quiet: footsteps at the end of a hallway, a tapered breath suffocated by soil and shovels.

Wanda offers an hour for Jack to come back onto the show, and she says that this time he can even bring me. An entire hour. A history of the girl's life. Candle light vigils and visceral interviews. The story of two fathers falling apart at the seams.

It will be progressive and profitable and everyone will watch it, she says. And yeah, maybe if you're lucky, you'll find the girl too.

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I don't know why, but Jack and I end up at a cemetery. He says he wants to go searching. I walk in between rows of headstones, and can't help but read every name.

I lose myself in the mess of trees and bodies, and I find a house. The kind that a great-grandfather haunts. The chimney is cracked and the windows are boarded. Its front door has a hole smashed in like a wet, empty mouth. I walk toward the building, unable to imagine this hole as anything other than a black hole, the other side containing a gravity so heavy it could crush my skull. I rub my hand over the knots in the wood and consider what would happen if I stopped the ringing, what would happen if someone found me in the middle of a cemetery, with a full body and no head. For the first time I can remember, everything is quiet. I bend over and place my head through the door. Scanning the darkness, I see a star on the floorboards, but then I realize it's a discarded tooth.

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Jack says that he doesn't think the girl is missing. He thinks the ghost pulled her into the earth. I say that I believe him, but leave out that she might not have been forced.

It could also have been the man they saw at the bus station, Jack says.

Or the math teacher at her school, I say.

Or really anyone, he says.

I nod my head, and rest my arm on his shoulder. He's colder than I remember.

It doesn't really matter anymore, I say. Either way, she's in the

ground.

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Here darling, I burned you a star. One cold enough to hold in the hand. It's gas and plasma and light so dead that it rings inside your head.

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Wanda calls every day, but we don't answer the phone. There is only so much we can keep intact. After a while, the calls thin away. I start to wonder if she has gone missing too.

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Eventually, we lose track of days but the echoes still hang at the edge of my ear. I sit across the dinner table from Jack. He cuts his dinner in a slow, methodical way. We talk about work, what we saw last night on TV, and I almost say something about how we don't really talk about the girl anymore, but I decide against it. I try to smile but my mouth just hangs open as if the creases on his face surprise me somehow.

I think about making a joke: how when we're done with dinner, we should watch Wanda's show. His eyes still look tired though, and again I steer away from the girl. There's no reason to bring it up anyway. It's all bone dust and fruit rinds, now.

The echoes start to ring in my ear again, but I'm better than I used to be. These days I can completely shut the noises out. I rest my eyes, and close out the room. I focus on the whirling of the ceiling fan or the sound of falling rain. I listen to honeysuckle withering in the garden, and the voices of children running through the neighborhood, louder and louder still. Most days though, I listen to the earth, and search for some trace of the girl: a rattling bone or a shallow breath—a sign she is with us. I hear the

ground compress into her, slowly churning her body into something akin to a heartbeat. The ringing in my ear fades, and she seems closer to us than ever. There are three seats at this table. No one makes a sound.